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AUTHOR: SMSgt Richard E. Mathews, SNCOA Student, 6 Dec 1995

Reviewed by:

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EPC Representative Joe Cle date 7 Jan 98

Scanner Operator Suz Roden date 9 Jan 98

APPROVED BY:

Gary R. Akin

GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF

Director

Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

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RESEARCH PAPER
ON
THE HISTORY BEHIND AIR FORCE ENLISTED CHEVRONS

by

SMSGT Richard E. Mathews
USAF Enlisted History Research Project

Gunter Air Force Base, Alabama

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The Air Force chevrons on your shoulders are rich in history and status. You wear these stripes with pride and commitment to country and to yourself. This paper will trace the path of the enlisted chevron from its birth to how it appears today. There are some major milestones of enlisted chevron that occurred before the Air Force was established and I will cover those events briefly. The word "chevron" is French in origin and means roof, which is just what a military chevron patch looks like -- two straight lines meeting at an angle (18:2). Regardless of how a chevron is designed, it has always served to identify the grade of the wearer.

The enlisted rank recognition was very simple during the early days of the American Revolution. General George Washington pointed out that since the Continental Army unfortunately had no uniforms, his soldiers had no convenient means of recognizing their leaders. He therefore ordered that sergeants should sew a strip of bright red cloth upon their right shoulders, and corporals a green strip (11:2). The first official chevron for the enlisted forces was awarded in 1782 when Gen. Washington ordered, "Men who had served for three years with bravery, fidelity and good conduct wear a white chevron on the left sleeve of the uniform coat as a badge of honor" (18:2). After that the noncommissioned officer rank insignia evolved into a hodgepodge of cloth stripes, sashes, epaulets, badges, cockades, and other displays (11:27). This situation changed dramatically by the passage of the congressional Reorganization Act, on 4 June 1920.

This act was had sweeping affects throughout all military branches, grades and specialties. The main thrust of this act was to grouped enlisted soldiers into seven pay grades without any regard to job or specialty. This was a break from the historic practice

of authorizing each and every position in the Army and listing the pay of each job (11:38). Directly following passage of this act, various sections of the General Staff debated the best way to show the seven pay grades by using the many contemporary chevrons. Many schemes were proposed, but Colonel Robert Wyllie led a campaign to scrap the old job identification concept completely and adopt chevrons that would reflect only pay grades and not by a type of job (11:38). Ultimately he was successful, and thus established the basic chevron concept still in use today. Only the historical diamond used to designate First Sergeants survived as a mark of position during this time. The chevrons designed and worn after this time stayed with the Army Air Force and would continue to be worn during the early days after the establishment of the Air Force in 1947.

When the Department of the Air Force was created on 26 July 1947, the enlisted rank chevrons retained the "Army" look (see Figure 1). The ranks, from the lowest to highest, were: Private (no stripes), Private, First Class (one inverted "V" upward stripe), Corporal (two upwards stripes), Sergeant (three upward stripes), Staff Sergeant (three upward stripes with one "rocker" stripe), Technical Sergeant (three upward and two rocker stripes), Master Sergeant (three upward and three rocker stripes) and the position of First Sergeant (same as a master sergeant's stripes, but with a diamond between the upward stripes and the rocker stripes) (17:4). So Air Force enlisted personnel had to deal with being in a newly established service with chevrons from their prior military branch, the Army, until 1948.

In late 1947 or early 1948, the basic design was one of several presented to a board of 150 airmen at Bolling AFB, Washington D.C., in which 55 percent of them selected the style in use today (18:4). General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, the first Air Force Chief of Staff, approved this choice of the enlisted majority and the Air Force began the process of moving from the Army chevrons to the long awaited Air Force chevrons (18:4). Even though 1948 was not to long ago, there is no clear documentation on the design and thought process on the development of the Air Force enlisted chevron. The closest we can come is to summarize the designers intentions.

Whoever designed the stripes might have been trying to combine the shoulder patch worn by members of the Army Air Force (AAF) during World War II and the insignia used on aircraft (18:4). The patch featured wings with a pierced star in the center while the aircraft insignia was a stripe with two bars. The stripes might be the bars from the aircraft insignia slanted gracefully upward to suggest wings. The silver gray color contrasts with the blue uniform and might suggest clouds against the blue sky (18:4). The rank titles remained unchanged, at this time, along with the number of stripes for the appropriate grade, so some of the old Army Air Force would stay with the enlisted ranks until the 1950s (see Figure 2).

Finally, on 24 April 1952, the titles of the ranks changed (see Figure 3). The new titles, from bottom to top, are: Basic Airman (no stripe), Airman Third Class (one stripe), Airman Second Class (two stripes), Airman First Class (three stripes), Staff Sergeant (four stripes), Technical Sergeant (five stripes) and Master Sergeant (six stripes) (1:104). At this time it is planned to develop new insignia for the three classes of Airmen (First,

Second, and Third). Preliminary sketches of proposed insignia have the stripes at a horizontal level, reserving the angled stripes for the top three ranks to differentiate Non-Commissioned Officers (1:104). The purpose of this change was to increase the prestige of the Staff, Technical and Master Sergeant chevrons. General Vandenberg approved a new chevron for Airman, First, Second and Third Classes (see Figure 4). However, due to the supply of chevrons on hand, action was delayed until this supply had been depleted. On 12 March 1956, the old chevron was finally used up and the decision to change the design was resubmitted to the new Chief of Staff, General Nathan F. Twining. The Air Force Chief of Staff replied in a short informal memo stating “No change to be made in insignia” (6:346). The only change to the chevron during this period was in 1954, when Gen. Twining approved the traditional First Sergeant diamond to be sewn in the “V” above the chevron (5:261). The next big event for chevron evolution occurred when congress authorized the grades E-8 and E-9 for all branches of service in 1958.

In the July to December 1958 time frame the two new grades (E-8 and E-9) were particularly welcome in that they would relieve the “compression” in the grade of Master Sergeant (7:32). It was determined that the titles and insignia should blend into the existing system with the least possible change. The comments of the major commands were solicited and the titles of Senior Master Sergeant (E-8) and Chief Master Sergeant (E-9) were the most popular. They were considered to be the best in clearly indicating ascending grade and to have the advantage of not reflecting unfavorably on those long-time Master Sergeants who would not be selected for the new grades (7:32). With the

tittles work out the Air Force along with the major commands focused on the chevron design.

Since it had been decided to build on the existing chevron pattern rather than to revise the whole series, the problem of integrating the new grades into the existing chevrons became acute. Some of the other designs suggested and then discarded were: the use of the Master Sergeant insignia superimposing one and two stars (rejected because of the overlapping of general officer's insignia); and the same with lozenges (rejected out of confusion with the First Sergeant insignia) (7:34). The choice was finally, and reluctantly, narrowed to a pattern which superimposed on the older Master Sergeant insignia, with one and two additional stripes pointing in the opposite direction (upward) leaving a field of blue between the lower Master Sergeant insignia and the stripes of the new grades (see Figure 5) (7:34). The important factor was setting the super grades apart. Some airmen had long complained that the present Technical Sergeant and Master Sergeant stripes were so similar that it takes a close look and a stripe-counting process to tell them apart (14:4). With the stripes now going on top and at a different angle there should be no such problem in distinguishing a senior or chief from a Master Sergeant. However, this design did not suit everyone, therefore, the solution was accompanied with the recommendation that the whole matter of revising the enlisted structure as to titles and insignia be studied (7:34). But as time would tell this design would remain unchanged for years to come. The next major changes occurred in 1967 with the creation of the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force and the elevation of E-4s to NCO status.

In January 1967, the position of the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force (CMSAF) with its own distinctive insignia was created. An option considered for the new stripes was the addition of a third stripe atop the normal Chief Master Sergeant chevrons, but that was rejected as “too much” after Chief Master Sergeant Donald L. Harlow (later to be the second CMSAF) modeled the proposal before the Air Staff (4:4). Ultimately, on 3 March 1967, a star encircled by a wreath on the interior filed of the stripes was settled upon (see Figure 6) (4:4). During this same year, Airman grades, titles and terms of address were revised to make the following changes and to restore NCO status of grade E-4: Airman Basic (no stripes), Airman (one stripe), Airman First Class (two stripes, Sergeant (three stripes), Staff Sergeant through Chief Master Sergeant, and First Sergeants, were not change (see Figure 7) (2:78).

The elevation of E-4s to NCO status brought the Air Force in line with other services which have long considered their E-4s as noncommissioned officers (3:1). The Air Force’s main reason for the titles change was that the E-4 grade had become linked more and more with the sergeant ranks (3.1). Also, the change restored the NCO status lost to this grade in 1952 when the Air Force adopted new titles. The principle reason for retitling the lower airman ranks was, “Because we believe the terms ‘second class’ and ‘third class’ are undesirable in association with any Air Force member” (3:3). The official order for the change was signed by Lt. Gen Horace M. Wade, on 19 October 1967, and was effective “immediately” (3:3).

One of the more interesting proposed changes to Air Force senior enlisted chevrons occurred in 1973 (see Figure 8). The Air Force asked commands for their views on the

proposal in a letter from Vice Chief of Staff, General Horace M. Wade. If this proposal would have passed the top three enlisted grades would have stripped off their stripes and pinned on this insignia. In addition, formal titles for the top three would have been changed to superintendent (E-7), senior superintendent (E-8), and chief superintendent (E-9) (20:1). This design would have been different to say the least and would have closely resembled Britain's Royal Air Force insignia in appearance.

In December 1975, the E-2 through E-4 rank chevrons were reviewed during a CORNA TOP meeting, which examined a proposed three tier enlisted force organization. A new criteria for advancement to NCO status was decided and announced to the major commands on 30 December 1975 (8:38). A key aspect of the new program was a new insignia for Senior Airmen and below (see Figure 9). The insignia would sport a blue star instead of a silver star in the center of the chevrons. With all this action occurring in the airmen ranks, it was only a matter of time until proposals would be made again to change the senior NCO chevrons.

In June 1976, various proposals for a distinctive uniform insignia item for the top-three NCOs grades were provided to the major commands for comment. The major commands concurred with three proposals: (1) An additional overstripe for the top three, (2) An optional shoulder mark (board) with embroidered grade insignia on shirts with epaulets, and (3) Use of miniature grade insignia on the collar of the short sleeve shirt (9:66). The Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, Thomas N. Barnes, disagreed. He did not perceive any "grass roots" support for an insignia change. Consequently, General Jones, the Chief of Staff, placed the proposals in a "hold" status (9:66). Finally, after

over five years of staffing one of the proposals is approved. Headquarters, AFMPC on 25 February 1982, releases Interim Message Change 82-1 to Air Force Regulation 35-10.

This change allows the top-three enlisted ranks to wear should mark (board) insignia for shirts with epaulets instead of chevrons on the arms for the first time (13:1). After this action, the enlisted chevron will go unchanged for the rest of the decade.

On 19 March 1991, General Merrill McPeak, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, announced the termination of the E-4 NCO (Sergeant) status, effective 2 May 1991 (12:2). In place since October 1967, the removal of NCO status for E-4s was due primarily because the ratio between NCOs and Airmen was off balance due to the mandated drawdown. This action would drop the ratio from around 77 percent of the enlisted force being NCOs to around a 52 percent NCO enlisted force strength (12:2). This action brought Staff Sergeants back as the first-level NCO grade as it had been in 1952 through 1967. Later that year, General McPeak had even more changes in store for the enlisted ranks.

In October 1991, General McPeak and Chief Pfingston revealed the new proposed enlisted chevron. The first part of the proposal returned the silver star back to all enlisted ranks. The star was removed in the late 1970s to give distinction to NCOs and since NCO status was not directly connected to rank, a star identified those who had earned that standing. With NCO status now conferred with the rank of staff sergeant, differentiation was no longer needed (15:48). The second part of the proposal affected the top three or the senior NCO ranks. Specifically, one stripe would be taken off the bottom and put at the top starting with master sergeant. Senior Master Sergeant would have two stripes up

with five down, and Chief, three up and five down (see Figure 10) (12:1). This was done with the intent to provide more recognition of the special trust and responsibility placed with the top three enlisted grades (15:48). Also, this change would standardize the Air Force rank with that of the Army and Marine Corps. The new stripes used on the jacket are a half-inch wider than the current ones but appear much larger because they are white instead of the more subdued silver (19:5). Besides the increase in size, the new color gives a cleaner, newer appearance and makes it easier to distinguish ranks at a distance (15:48). While making it easier to distinguish ranks at a distance with “blues” on, a big step is taken backwards with the removal of enlisted rank chevrons from the Battle Dress Uniform (BDUs).

In November 1991, the Uniform Board, with the approval of General McPeak, approves the aircrew-style patches on the BDU while eliminating separate enlisted rank chevron. This action lead to much confusion over the rank of anyone until a close inspection of the name tag could be made. The original plan of changing to just the name patch was to reduce the cost to maintain BDUs for both the service member and the Air Force (16:6). However, the overwhelming negative feedback and complaints from the field resulted in Gen McPeak giving the go-ahead for sewing the stripes back on BDU sleeves and field jackets while retaining the aircrew-style name patch (19:5). On the other side of the coin, General McPeak did pick a winner with the new style of chevrons.

The new enlisted rank insignia -- bigger and brighter than the old stripes -- are preferred by many and have become particularly hot sellers (10:14). One drawback though, is the confusion generated by the mixing of the new top three NCO chevrons

with the old style and stems from the extra upper stripe that has been added for each of those grades, which makes a master sergeant look like a senior, and senior like a chief (10:19). This will continue to be a source of confusion as long as the old chevrons are worn right along side the new. When General Ronald Fogleman became the Air Force Chief of Staff he reversed many uniform changes approved by General McPeak but he was completely satisfied with the new bolder, brighter enlisted chevrons (21:13). Be proud of those chevrons on your shoulders, they are part of our heritage. They represent years of duty, service and dedication to the best and most powerful air force in the world, the United States Air Force.

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